

NATO, R.I.P.

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In what might be described as a quest for coherence through commodification, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has hired a former Coca-Cola executive to foster greater understanding about its reason for being.¹ But can an alliance emulate a soft drink giant's success at reinvention? Not likely. Coke has been creative—though not always successful—in its self-presentation, but no one has ever doubted what it is: a beverage. NATO's problem is that its purpose is no longer clear, even to its own members. In several key NATO states, few people know what the alliance does, let alone how it serves their interests. And who can blame them? Just try to define the present purpose of NATO as a military alliance in a sentence, even a long sentence. It's not easy as it once was: From its creation in 1949 until the end of 1991, everyone knew that NATO existed to deter the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact, and, failing that, to defend Western Europe.

As all serious Atlanticists recognize, however, that was not NATO's only purpose. NATO was a military alliance on paper, but a political arrangement in everyone's minds. As its first Secretary General Lord Ismay famously quipped, NATO was created not just to “keep the Russians out” but also to keep “the Germans down, and the Americans in.” In other words, it was designed to prevent a repetition of

mistakes made after World War I: avert another round of German hypernationalist recidivism, and another American relapse into isolationism. Statesmen are always busy solving the last postwar endgame no less than generals are always busy preparing to fight the last war.

Still, it worked. NATO was a critical element in a multi-pronged strategy to maintain peace and security in Europe. Today, few Europeans are worried that even a reunited Germany will start another world war, and few expect another American relapse into isolationism (which should not be confused with some retrenchment in what is still essentially an internationalist strategy). The question going forward, however, is whether NATO still has a useful role in any of these three areas: preventing unwanted Russian influence, taming Germany's historical demons and keeping U.S. power attached to both European security and the broader American interests in peace and stability on the continent.

What NATO Is For

What about keeping the Russians out? Despite energy-rich Russia's swagger, the idea of its attacking Europe is close to unthinkable. While the states recently admitted to NATO from Eastern and Central Europe, especially Poland and the Baltic States, point to Rus-

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¹Stephen Castle, “NATO Hires a Coke Executive to Retool Its Brand”, *New York Times*, July 16, 2008.

sia's disproportionate August attack on Georgia as fresh evidence of Russian imperialism, the proportion of their GNP devoted to defense has declined. And whatever else it may signify, Russia's success in subduing a tiny, poor country with no serious military power to speak of hardly proves that it is capable of victories against stronger adversaries. What has been largely missed in the coverage of the war is that it revealed persistent problems that plague Russia's armed forces, particularly outmoded equipment, ill-equipped troops and poor coordination.

While no one worries seriously about a Russian invasion of Europe, some do worry about other avenues of Russian influence. Russia adroitly divides Europe, as it does NATO, too, insofar as it is able. France and Germany favor treading lightly on hot-button issues such as the erosion of Russian democracy and the Kremlin's bully-boy behavior in its "near abroad", fearing that a hard line will only increase Moscow's intransigence and provoke a backlash against Western sanctimoniousness and double standards. (Putin's accusations of hypocrisy are not entirely false. Which is less democratic: Russia or, say, Saudi Arabia, with which the United States is closely aligned?) What Donald Rumsfeld called "Old Europe" tends to be leery that the anti-Russian animus of the Balts and the Poles could become the tail that wags the EU dog.

Perhaps the clearest example of the European divergence on Russia, at least before the August 2008 Russo-Georgian war, came at NATO's April 2008 Bucharest Summit. Before and during the session, the Bush Administration lobbied forcefully and publicly for placing Ukraine and Georgia on the path to membership and was joined by the Czechs, Poles and Balts. But to no avail. France and Germany, in particular, feared that placing Georgia and Ukraine on a clear Membership Action Plan would over-extend the alliance and create obligations to two potentially unstable countries embroiled in disputes with Russia. The disagreement was finessed by an anodyne affirmation of the intent to issue a formal invitation. Washington should be glad. The Georgian War, which a Membership Action Plan in no way would have prevented, suggests that the Administration owes a debt of gratitude to the French and the Germans (but doubtlessly won't pay up).

What about keeping the Germans down? The specter of a revanchist Germany once kept Europeans awake at night, but no longer. Europe, the cauldron of war for half a millennium before 1945, has been a neo-Kantian community of peace for more than a generation, with Germany as a stalwart member. Embedded in the European Union, and with pacifism a notable part of its political discourse, Germany seeks influence via diplomatic and economic means, which is to say it does what its fellow European states do. Land grabbing and saber rattling belong to a discredited past of Junkers and racist demagogues.

Keep the Americans in? Anything is possible in theory, but the idea that the politics of American national security could be de-Atlanticized in the 21st century is far-fetched. In a globalizing world, even the most hidebound national security maven understands the density and significance of U.S.-European ties. Given the strength of these bonds, it is becoming less clear that NATO is necessary to keep America involved in Europe.

What brings the question of NATO's present function into focus is that, despite adjustments necessitated by the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and plans to further reduce the number of American troops in Europe, some 44,000 still remain there. But the rationale for even this smaller, yet substantial, deployment is becoming progressively less clear. The direst dangers the United States faces no longer emanate from Europe. The troops have remained in Europe, in part, because their presence is good for local economies. Indeed, it has often been the Europeans, not the Americans, who have resisted their removal. Moreover, it is cheaper to pre-position U.S. forces and equipment for Middle Eastern and African contingencies in Europe than having to move them from the continental United States. The best explanation is simply that old routines and rationales become entrenched. But these are not the kind of reasons over which ebullient Atlanticists can get misty-eyed, nor are they persuasive.

So if NATO is no longer needed to keep the Russians out, the Germans down or the Americans in, what is it for? NATO's American champions, who represent mainstream

thinking in U.S. foreign policy, clearly need other arguments to justify the continuation of the alliance, and they are not shy about producing them. Some are quick to damn those skeptical of NATO's relevance as isolationists. Some claim NATO represents a community of democracies ripe for expansion beyond Europe. Some claim it's wrong to focus on the military facet of the organization now that the Cold War has ended and NATO is evolving. None of these arguments holds water.

The claim that those who question NATO's relevance are *ipso facto* isolationists is reminiscent of the complaint that anyone who doesn't like Wagnerian opera hates all music. There's more than one way to express U.S. interests in a flourishing Atlantic community; the contention that a military alliance is essential for this needs to be explained, not merely asserted, not least because its underlying logic is no longer compelling.

If democracy is what binds NATO and provides it a larger purpose, why not expand it into some version of a League of Democracies that includes Japan, Israel, India, Argentina, Brazil and other non-Western democracies? Proposals to create a grand democratic coalition based on existing U.S. alliances have been advanced by several observers and blessed by John McCain (though not as a replacement for NATO). Refashioning NATO into a club of democracies, however, would require not only a change of name but also a redefinition of objectives, a drastic overhaul that would end the alliance as we have known it for half a century.

What about the argument that NATO today, even if it does not become the nucleus of a community of democracies, has outgrown Europe and must seek wider vistas? That can mean two things: that NATO's military capacities should be used outside Europe, or that it should morph into something other than a military alliance in its charter, organization, planning and self-image.

If it were to do the latter—and NATO has already tilted in that direction from time to time—the United States would immediately become entangled in the growing ambivalence between NATO and European Union functions. A new, non-military-focused NATO operating as an *ad hoc* tool-kit for U.S. policy is something fundamentally different than

NATO as it has existed since its creation, and something that no longer plugs in cleanly to European institutions. Besides, there is scant evidence so far, based on what NATO says and does, that it wants to become in effect an armed variant of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

If it were to do the former—and it has done so, too, first in a near “out-of-area” domain, the Balkans, and then further afield in Afghanistan—it risks taking on tasks its core political consensus cannot sustain, and hence failing at the missions it takes on. A military alliance used as an *ad hoc* expeditionary supplement to U.S. foreign policy is an instrument that lacks a strategic rationale from a European perspective, and is therefore politically unsustainable in the long run. Either way, NATO cannot survive, except in inert bureaucratic amber.

From the Balkans to Afghanistan

Evidence that NATO will not be able to take on a second life by becoming a global deputy to the U.S. sheriff emerges from a closer look at the two cases just mentioned: the Balkans and Afghanistan.

While it's true that the Balkans are in Europe, the NATO operations there nevertheless represented an out-of-area foray in that they were not undertaken to defend member states. The alliance's use of force against Serbia (1995) and in Kosovo (1999) revealed the massive imbalance between American and non-American capabilities. Since then, the Europeans have done little to boost their capabilities to reduce this disparity, and there are no signs that they plan to do so despite their 2002 Prague Summit pledge to create a rapid “Response Force” for distant operations.

Indeed, what has happened since Prague highlights the gap between declarations and deeds. On the operational side, European forces face severe limitations, notably in airlift, logistics and aerial surveillance. On the political side, some countries, France and Germany in particular, have insisted that the force will not go into action without the consent of their national parliaments and UN approval—requirements that could render it unusable or require a redefinition

of "rapid." They have also insisted that its use comport with the aims of the military force the European Union plans to assemble.

A variation on the out-of-area idea is that, while NATO will continue relying on America's armaments to wage war, its other members will handle peacekeeping once the guns are silent and the dust has settled, as in Bosnia and Kosovo. This seems like a sensible division of labor, but it has two problems. First, the Europeans are not particularly keen on their part of the assignment, and they are right to be skeptical that an alliance of theoretical equals that in fact features the equivalent of class distinctions can last long. As the staunchly pro-American British political commentator Timothy Garton Ash put it, Europeans don't relish the messy mission wherein "America does the cooking; Europe does the washing up."

If America's NATO-Europe partners wish to avoid the role of washing up after the American cook, they must acquire far more robust military capabilities for conducting operations far afield. This is unlikely for both psychological and demographic reasons. With the two world wars having left their marks on European memories, there is scant support for hikes in military spending anywhere on the Continent, even in countries like Britain and France that retain something of their historic national pride. The prevailing ethos favors dispute resolution through persuasion rather than power. More important, perhaps, in virtually every NATO country apart from the United States, birth rates are below replacement levels. There are fewer people of working age to support retirees, and claims on the welfare state are liable to increase on account of the economic dislocations generated by globalization and rising costs of social services for an aging population.

The second problem with a two-tiered alliance is that European enthusiasm for peacekeeping missions is likely to wane the further they are from Brussels. The Balkans arguably was a special case, one in which European and American perceptions overlapped enough to enable common action—and in a place that is located in Europe. That is liable to be the exception, not the rule, as disagreements over Iraq and frustrations in Afghanistan have so vividly illustrated.

As has been well-documented, there were several reasons for the revolt staged by France, Germany and others in the lead-up to the war in Iraq. The Bush Administration had decided on regime change by force of arms regardless of whether the UN Security Council obliged with a second, enabling resolution. Iraq did not seem to France and Germany to present as clear and present a danger to the United States as al-Qaeda did, and they believed that starting a war in the core of the Middle East would make the terrorist problem worse instead of better. Washington sought to draw NATO into its pursuit of a preventive war, treating dissent as disloyalty. None of these reasons applied to Afghanistan, a war seen in an altogether different light in Europe and elsewhere. The United States destroyed the Taliban regime only after it rejected Washington's demand to hand over Osama bin Laden, and the war was waged with UN authorization. Given the justness and, in European eyes, legality of America's cause, NATO invoked Article 5 of its Charter for the first time in its history.

As it happened, the Bush Administration neither needed nor wanted NATO military help in the opening combat operations in Afghanistan. After the defeat of the Taliban, however, came the washing up. European warships patrolled the Indian Ocean, and European troops were deployed as part of the larger International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), over which NATO assumed command in 2003. At that point, no Europeans had died in combat, and NATO's Afghan deployment looked to reinforce the success of its Balkan operations.

Alas, as even Alexander the Great learned, Afghans are allergic to armed strangers in their midst. The Taliban, or something like it, arose again out of the seemingly inexhaustible energies of the Pashtun tribal patriarchy—with the patronage of Pakistan's Inter-Service Intelligence—and a new war began. But despite the nature of the mission, most NATO countries were no more willing to fight in Afghanistan than they were in Iraq. The British, Canadians and Dutch have dispatched troops to the southern battles zones of Helmand, Kandahar and Oruzgun, respectively. Other NATO forces, however, operate under strict rules of engagement defined by their home governments

and confine themselves to providing security, training Afghan security forces, backing up the so-called Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), and extending advice on legal and political reform. Despite the upsurge in Taliban operations since 2007 and pleas for help by senior NATO and U.S. officials, the situation has not appreciably changed. The British, Canadians and Dutch, along with American forces (some attached to ISAF, others under U.S. command) have been left to fight the Taliban, and are none too happy about it. The Canadian government, facing strong public opposition to the war, has indicated that it might exit unless other members step up.

Calls for help did finally evoke a response in the spring of 2008, when the new French President Nicolas Sarkozy announced at the Bucharest Summit that he would send 700 more troops to supplement the 1,670 French already stationed there. This was a welcome step but hardly a big one, given that France has the fourth largest defense budget in the world and is the Continent's premier military power. Sarkozy's addition of one battalion will not substantially close the gap between the number of soldiers now present in the south and east of Afghanistan—the key arena for the war against

the Taliban—and the number NATO generals say are needed. As a result the Bush Administration was forced in June to commit another 3,200 troops to Afghanistan and to announce plans to deploy 7,000 more, in spite of being overstretched by the war in Iraq.

There is no dispute within NATO military planning circles that the Taliban has become a more formidable foe and that more troops are needed in Afghanistan. But there are hard feelings about the way Washington has gone about trying to secure them. European deployments to Afghanistan after mid-2006 were based on a fairly rosy assessment, undertaken by the U.S. military, of what would be needed in 2007 and 2008. When this appraisal proved faulty, the United States asked several European NATO members to redirect their contingents to undertake combat responsibilities for which they were neither trained nor equipped. When they demurred, Defense Secretary Robert Gates warned publicly at the February 2008 Munich Conference on Security Policy that European reticence risked creating a “two-tiered alliance” that compartmentalized military and non-military responsibilities. Some Europeans, the Germans in particular, thought this was not exactly fair.



Defense Secretary Robert Gates speaks in Munich, February 2008.

That is partly why, apart from Sarkozy's pledge, only Poland and Georgia have anted up (but neither country's troops will operate in the south and east where additional help is most needed, and Georgia is not part of NATO in any event). The alliance is, to put it mildly, riven over Afghanistan. American soldiers in Afghanistan, as well as their civilian masters at home, have been known to refer scornfully to the ISAF Coalition variously as "I Saw Americans Fight" or "I Suck at Fighting." But the "old" Europeans complain, mostly in private, that the Americans have failed to develop a coherent strategy to defeat the Taliban. Counterinsurgency goes beyond the application of military power. Winning over the population by promoting state-building and economic reconstruction and development is no less essential, yet these tasks are handled by national fiefdoms, and the Americans have forced little if any coordination among those states handling non-military tasks. The 26 Provincial Reconstruction Teams, for instance, report to national authorities, not to NATO, and there is no synchronization between states handling judicial reform and those training the police.

No less problematic is the failure to integrate war-fighting with political and economic assistance.² As many Europeans see it, the Bush Administration has exaggerated the military dimension of its Afghan strategy just as it has in the wider War on Terror, failing in both cases to devise anything remotely like unity of command between kinetic and non-kinetic aspects of these inherently political struggles. In short, while many Americans doubt European seriousness when it comes to fighting, many Europeans doubt the U.S. capacity to think, plan or organize itself to win the kinds of wars in which it is now embroiled.

Of course, neither the Bush Administration nor American military commanders, not to mention NATO officials, suggest that NATO's dysfunction in Afghanistan endangers the alliance's future. But it does. As retired British General Rupert Smith, whose career included a term as Deputy Supreme Allied Commander Europe, has written, Afghanistan could be NATO's "death knell."³

Putting a brave face on things, NATO officialdom notes that the Taliban has taken heavy casualties in 2008; that ISAF now contains

forty members; and that its troop strength has increased from 33,000 in early 2007 to more than 50,000 by mid-2008. The reality, though, is that NATO is in trouble in Afghanistan. Is it because most of NATO's major military powers with the wherewithal to provide combat forces for ISAF's operations in the south (Spain, Italy and Germany) have failed to do so? Or is it because the overall American strategy is fundamentally flawed? Both. The major European states simply lack the political support at home to do what the United States is asking them to do. Their publics do not see the troubles of Afghanistan as affecting them significantly or directly. But even if the Europeans did what Washington wanted, it is not clear that it would make a significant difference. This is the kind of mess that can bring an alliance to ruin.

Tackling Tyranny

If the Balkans were too easy, politically speaking, and Afghanistan has proved to be too hard, then what about re-inventing NATO as a tool to combat mass atrocities inside and outside Europe—in other words, making the Balkan examples the norm? At first blush, this new job description seems sensible. It is something that badly needs doing, and one might even expect support for such a mission within NATO countries. After all, safeguarding human rights has become a European mantra for many years.

But making this NATO's new calling is another matter. Europeans may favor sit-ins and demonstrations to protest the slaughter of innocents, but few are prepared to see their militaries devoted to fighting warlords and ethnic cleansers. They are even less animated about seeing their tax monies directed to reconfigure their armed forces to project power into faraway locations, or to assume the long and hazardous duties of peacekeeping, especially in places that require actually battling armed offenders. To be

²See Ilana Bet-El and Rupert Smith, "The Bell Tolls for NATO", *The National Interest* (January/February 2008); and the report by the Atlantic Council of the United States, "Saving Afghanistan" (January 2008).

³Quoted in Bet-El and Smith, "The Bell Tolls."

fair, Americans are hardly more keen about far-flung missions of mercy—think of Darfur or the Congo—and, given the human and financial toll taken by the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, they will become even more hesitant about waging distant wars, especially those with no compelling connection to their security. Rather than creating a new and shared rationale for NATO, humanitarian intervention will breed disunity, with Europe and America squabbling over who should carry the military burden and acquire the means to do so.

Europeans still prefer that the United Nations defend people against rape and slaughter, that it be the global cop despite its proven ineptitude at such missions. This is not simply self-serving or cynical. Europeans honestly believe that UN missions have the stamp of international approval, and hence legitimacy, while NATO does not. NATO is, as Europeans see it, a rich, white, Western club, and the colonial history of many of its members opens its humanitarian interventions to all manner of objections. Also, few European governments want to spark a conflict with Moscow and Beijing, who insist that the Security Council approve all such interventions—except, of course, when they are the ones doing the intervening, as with Russia in Georgia. Finally, Europeans, and not just Europeans, have found no satisfactory answer to the following question: What can the world do when rulers jeopardize their own citizens' lives and liberties and assert that what happens within their territory is no one's business but their own? This has been the stance of regimes like the Burmese junta, whose callous reaction to the typhoon that killed thousands of its people likely led to the deaths of many more, and of the Sudanese regime, which has blithely massacred, raped, starved and otherwise displaced the Zaghawa, Fur and Masalit peoples in Darfur for years.

These are among the reasons that NATO has been unable to embrace the mission of humanitarian intervention in such places as Rwanda, Darfur and Somalia. Worse, it hasn't effectively provided the material support that would enable others to do so. Consider the joint UN-African Union force that Sudanese authorities allowed into Darfur after much haggling about its composition and responsibilities. It was crippled by

its lack of mobility and could not get UN members to contribute the fewer than one hundred helicopters its commanders said they needed. NATO did not seize the opportunity to provide the equipment, even though it could have done so without major sacrifice.

NATO's European members tend to be enthusiastic, in principle, about the human rights community's latest solution to mass killings: "the responsibility to protect", commonly known as "R2P." (Canada played a pivotal role in the rise of R2P; its former Foreign Minister, Lloyd Axworthy, was instrumental in organizing the international commission that wrote the definitive report on the concept.) The gist of R2P is that when governments fail to defend the lives and liberties of their citizens, or actually deprive them of both, that duty falls on the "international community." The international community must react through the UN, starting with modest steps such as mediation and, if those steps fail, adopting tougher ones such as sanctions and, as a last resort, the use of force—guided, of course, by "just war" principles.

However difficult it is to put this principle into practice, it does represent a serious and intelligent effort to reshape the debate on sovereignty—and to do so along lines that European Kantians should find appealing. If NATO is serious about making humanitarian intervention one of its defining missions, it should be engaged in such conceptualization, one with ethical, legal and operational underpinnings. But it isn't, and it likely never will.

Expanding Into the Ether

In the face of NATO's core problem—that it is a military alliance without missions that both make sense relative to its capabilities and command majority political support—it is passing strange that the pact's cheerleaders praise its expansion as its most noteworthy recent achievement. In truth, expansion cannot compensate for a lack of defined purpose; it can only bedevil efforts to find one.

Moreover, expansion has contributed to the deterioration in America's relationship with Russia. It is not the only cause, of course, but it is certainly among the big ones; one doesn't have

to talk to many Russians to figure that out. Expansion has also diminished NATO's capacity to collectively assess whether and how it should take risks, and an alliance that cannot do a coherent risk assessment is no alliance at all. Can anyone seriously claim, for example, that NATO has acted with unity and effectiveness following Russia's attack on Georgia—that it has done much more than call the Kremlin's gambit “unacceptable” (which will not keep Vladimir Putin up at night) and assuring Georgia of membership, at some undefined point in the future? Disagreements within NATO on how to react reflect the reality that its members think principally in terms of their particular, and dissimilar, interests with respect to Russia. This has made for confusion at best, paralysis at worse, with some allies favoring variants of containment against Russia and the admission of Georgia and Ukraine, and others engagement toward Moscow and limits to NATO's expansion.

Moreover, a military pact that has grown from 16 member states (its Cold War peak) to 26 will inevitably find it harder to agree on significant new missions. This is especially true now that the leeway for bucking American leadership is so much greater, given that the Red Army no longer looms over the Fulda Gap. A larger, more unwieldy alliance with ill-defined missions will also encounter to an even greater degree the divisive free-rider problem of states that enjoy membership but shirk onerous responsibilities, such as in Afghanistan. That can only make NATO even more of a two-tiered alliance, and two-tiered alliances cannot last unless a single and vivid threat persuades the strongest powers that free-riding is an acceptable price to be paid for political solidarity.

Those who celebrate NATO expansion sometimes do so on loftier and more far-sighted grounds—that it was necessary to solidify the zone of Western civilization in a time of uncertainty, and that NATO was the only quick fix at hand to send the right signals. Perhaps, but that does not mean that NATO is the only vehicle available to deepen and develop the Atlantic community. Nor does it preclude the risk that trying to make NATO do what it cannot do might actually harm that community, as seems a likely outcome of the Afghan mess.

A world without NATO seems unimaginable to most of the U.S. foreign policy establishment, and questions about the alliance's relevance and usefulness elicit predictable responses. One, already noted, is that if you raise questions about NATO you are an isolationist. This, of course, is a herring so red it positively glows in the dark. The United States will remain an internationalist power with an expansive strategy for many years to come—with or without NATO.

A narrower and somewhat more valid criticism is that NATO has been the pre-eminent pathway for American influence in Europe, which would be irreparably undermined were the alliance to unravel. Leaving aside the reality that NATO's most influential European members—not just France—want greater equality within the alliance and will hardly relish its being described as an instrument for ensuring American predominance in Europe, this assessment mistakenly treats NATO as the functional equivalent of the Transatlantic relationship. The former has been important to the latter but does not and need not subsume it. The United States and its NATO partners are united (and often divided, let it be said) by multifarious bonds. This creates interdependencies that must be handled adroitly, but it is hard to imagine a protracted or serious estrangement. It is safer to assume that the allies will cooperate (and compete) on a host of issues because their interests demand it, and that in the absence of NATO they will develop a different relationship. Conflating the Transatlantic relationship with NATO will only foreclose opportunities to fashion a new compact, one better attuned to the times.

Sixty years after its founding, NATO is in deep trouble, but its difficulties are the mark of its success. This remains a minority view, however, amid a torrent of convoluted defenses for NATO that all ultimately fail to answer the essential question: What precisely is NATO's purpose as a military alliance? Even a public relations wizard may be unable to devise a convincing answer. Coca Cola has proven that it can re-invent itself. Can NATO? Alas, some classic success stories cannot be anything but. ●